



Shared Visions

A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers
presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center ...

... The people who bring you Connections

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Volume Seven, Number Two

Hope, Joy, and Wonder

By Colleen Olphert

Former Mercy Corps Volunteer

Christmas should be a time of great hope, of joy, of wonder. It is a celebration of the Word becoming human. It reminds us that there is potential for peace on earth, good will to everyone. The time before, Advent, is a time of waiting and preparation, prayerful reflection and joyful anticipation. Or if you're in the middle of your volunteer year, working at a school for the physically and mentally handicapped, 2500 miles away from family and friends, advent can be a time of great stress and confusion, and Christmas will be celebrated at home in the midst of trying, in one short week, to catch up with everyone you've been away from for the past five months.

I now realize that volunteers everywhere, doing many different things, experience similar joys and stresses around the holidays. During my volunteer year, however, I thought my community and I were the only ones ever to experience these things.

I served my volunteer year at a school for the physically and mentally handicapped on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona with nine other Mercy Corps volunteers. The ten of us lived in three separate communities, but we shared transportation, cooking utensils, and various kitchen appli-

This issue of *Shared Visions* is designed to speak to volunteers before, during and after the holiday season. Use the articles, exercises and reflection questions as you process the experience of Christmas as a volunteer. The Pallotti Center family extends to you and the people served through your ministry our prayers for peace, love and justice.

ances, as well as the good times and bad times that come with volunteering. We also enjoyed celebrating each other's birthdays and the holidays together. As the ten of us geared up for Christmas, we plowed full speed ahead, forgetting only one thing - the true spirit behind the holiday season.

Since our school would be closed over Christmas, we all made arrangements to go home for the week between Christmas and New Year's. This would be the first time home since August for all of us. Excitement filled the air, but so did panic. There were gifts to be bought and made, homes and classrooms to be decorated, costumes to be sewn and songs to be practiced for the school's Christmas program, Secret Santas to be picked and a community

holiday party to plan. Nerves became frayed. Tempers flared. And a good deal of our energy was wasted on arguing.

Not everything during that time was negative, though. Being volunteers and short on cash, we came up with some creative homemade gifts and had fun creating clay ornaments, cranberry wine, Christmas cookies, and tasty breads. There was a pot-luck brunch with volunteers from the other school in the area and gatherings around the TV to watch holiday specials.

However, for me, the true celebration of the season took place when the four of us living together gathered for prayer a few days before we were to head home. We didn't

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A Christmas Far From Home

By James McCloskey

Former AMA Volunteer

On Christmas Eve, one of the holiest nights of the year, the Christian world seems to hold its breath in collective silence as a magical hush befalls the land. It is a night which truly humbles. It most certainly is a night divine, the eve before our Savior's birth.

One of my fondest memories of childhood was of lying on the couch in

my living room on Christmas Eve. By midnight, everyone else was in bed, fast asleep, except for my Mother who would always be putting on the final touches to the tree and greens around the fireplace. I would lie on the couch alone and in silence with all the lights out, except for those twinkling on the tree. I would savor the last fleeting moments of what was for me the most mystical night of the year.

As the television broadcast of Midnight Mass from Rome mingled with the strains of Bing Crosby and White

Christmas, I would doze off in the twinkling of the lights and the smell of fresh pine, in the promise of waking to a new and better world in the morning.

Years later, at 24, I still found myself upholding my childhood tradition on Christmas Eve, lying on the couch with twinkling lights on the tree, and even the soft voice of Bing on cassette. This Christmas Eve, though, I was alone in a small L'Arche community that seemed worlds away from that cozy couch at home. And it was.

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have an Advent wreath but we lit some purple and pink candles and, for the first time in weeks, opened ourselves to each other and God. I don't remember exactly what words were used, but I remember our apologizing to each other for our attitudes and actions the past couple of weeks. As it turned out we were all feeling similar things. We were all homesick and ready to go home, yet we were all scared about returning to family, friends and significant others whom we hadn't seen in five months. "What if feelings had changed?" "How would things be different?" "How would I fit into my 'old life' after five months of new experiences?" "How could I leave these friends that I had grown so close to in only a few months?" "If things were so hard now, what would they be like at the end of a whole year?" "How am I going to explain all this to people at home?"

All of this was happening on top of the "normal" holiday stress. As we shared our questions and fears, we started laughing, crying, and realizing that these fears were keeping us from truly entering into the joy of the season. That time of sharing with each other enabled me to travel home taking some comfort in the knowledge that I was not alone in my feelings and fears. I was also confident that I had a supportive community to return to after the holiday break. Forming that stronger bond with my community was one of the greatest gifts I received that year.

Even as community life was presenting many challenges to me during this time, the spirit of Christmas came alive for me in my students. I was a teacher's aide in a classroom of nine mentally and physically challenged teenagers. Their abilities to communicate, comprehend academics, socialize, and perform physical tasks covered a spectrum of levels. Also, their temperaments ranged from quiet, timid and shy to loud, bold, and outgoing. As with any group of teenagers, personalities often clashed and feelings were sometimes hurt. Christmas, however, brought with it an improvement in everyone's attitude and behavior. (That's not to say outbreaks didn't occur, but for a few weeks they lessened.) Perhaps this change was due to the common delight everyone took in decorating the classroom. Windows were painted with Christmas scenes, construction paper chains zigged and zagged their way around the classroom, paper snowflakes fluttered from the ceiling, and the crowning achievement was one of the most garishly decorated trees there has ever been. Moderation was not a lesson this class took to heart. But who wanted to stop students when they were working together peacefully and enthusiastically!

Another possible reason for this change was the students' unflinching belief in Santa Claus. These teenagers, some of them eighteen and nineteen years old, would forever be young children at heart. Their faith in things good was simple and unshakable. Great gifts would be waiting under the tree on Christmas day; but in preparation for that day you had to be a little nicer and behave a little better than usual. They were willing to make that bargain. We brought their letters to Santa in the mall, and my usually loud and boisterous class became quiet and tongue-tied as they stood before

The Angelic Christmas

Have you ever noticed how frequently an angel in the Bible is mentioned in connection with Christ's birth?

Read the following references:

Luke 1:31 The first Christmas message was when the angel told Mary you have won God's favor. Listen, you are to conceive and bear a son.

Matthew 2:20 Similarly, St. Joseph, upon learning of the birth, was told: "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as she has a child who is born to her by the Holy Spirit."

Luke 2:10 On the first Christmas night, to the terror of the shepherds, you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole world. He is Christ the Lord."

Matthew 28:5 (and Mark 16:6) This angelic message was given to the two Marys. When the two Marys came to Christ's tomb and the guards were frightened & the angel said to the two women: "Do not be afraid. Go for Jesus . . . go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead!'"

Reflection/discussion questions: 1. What are some ways an angel (messenger) spoke this message to me, what ways did the angel speak to others, and help co-workers, family, or others? How can I help them hear this message?

the man in the red suit. The quiet was short lived, however, as they soon raced to be the first to tell Santa their list of gifts.

This is not to say that the students only thought of the fun of receiving things at Christmas. I came to learn that they had also grasped the joy of giving. Homemade cards and gifts were lovingly prepared for their parents and caretakers. A holiday tradition of Secret Santas was carried out in our classroom as it is in many schools at this time of year. However, since many of our students lived in the school's group homes 30 miles from the closest mall, and social outings were part of our class's curriculum, we had a field trip to the mall for their presents. (The students had also grasped the concept of consumerism. Gifts for classmates had to be bought, not made.) Due to the class's finances, the dollar store was the shop of choice. This store, filled with what to my eyes looked like trinkets and cheap junk, was to them a store full of wondrous treasures, treasures that they were able to present to someone else. I have never seen gifts chosen with such concern and thought. This consideration for the receiver continued as we wrapped the gifts with great care and excitement. When they presented the gifts to each other, the students nearly burst with pride. Each gift was received with great joy and sincere gratitude. Smiles filled the room. I suddenly realized what made these gifts so special. It was because they, like the gift of the first Christmas, were given and received in love. Christmas is a time of great hope, of joy, of wonder. +

Christmas message: "Fear Not"

The New Testament gives us this message, especially in stories surrounding

Mary was startled by an angel who said to her: "Mary, do not be afraid: conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus."

Joseph, of Mary's pregnancy, was upset, and the angel comforted and encouraged him: "Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you good news about your wife"

To the frightened shepherds, the angel announced: "Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you good news about the people. Today in the town of David a savior has been born to you.

For the women who endured and is resounded at the time of Christ's death and resurrection. When there was a violent earthquake, the angel rolled back the stone, the Roman women: "There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for the body that has been buried. It is not here. It has risen."

How always I/we can respond to this angelic message, "Fear not." 2. If an angel says to me, "Do not be afraid," how do I need to move beyond? 3. Are there some ways I can be an angel to others? How do I serve to move beyond their fears? What fears do they have? How

"A Christmas Far From Home" continued from page 1

As an Associate Missionary of the Assumption (AMA), I was serving one year in mission to a community of ten severely mentally and physically handicapped children and young adults in Ciampino, Italy--just on the outskirts of Rome. I carried the mantle of mission on my shoulders and on that night, Christmas Eve, like no other night of the year, the mantle seemed too heavy to carry. Like so many first time missionaries and volunteers, I was spending my first Christmas not only away from home but on the other side of the world among strangers whom I had come to serve.

After four long months of complete Italian enculturation, of finally mastering the passato prossimo verb tense, of meeting the cooking standards of the pasta police, of endless household chores, of forging friendships in the Roman tongue, of meeting the draconian rules of life in community, and of coming to terms with the real life pain

and suffering of the children of the community, I was humbled like I've never been humbled before.

I sat there in silence that Christmas Eve after everyone else had long gone to bed, with the twinkling of that Italian style Christmas tree before me. I wondered why I had come to this seemingly forgotten corner of the world to be among those who the world would rather soon forget. With suffering, pain, confusion, hostility, fear, loneliness, sadness and isolation all around me, I laid my head down and cried.

In an extremely pensive mood, here I was on the outskirts of the Eternal City, the navel of the world to which Peter brought the Word to the pagan Romans. Four centuries later, that word would trickle North to the lands of my Celtic forefathers, who in turn would carry the same faith to the New World 1400 years later. And I, the latest link in this holy chain, was completing a circle of faith by "coming home" to serve a

community of abandoned Roman children. I indeed was mystified that Christmas Eve. I was humbled by the history and mystery of it all.

As I lay there in that house, the salt of my tears burned my eyes as the glare of the tree lights twinkled through. In that moment, among a people I did not know, in a culture I struggled to comprehend, serving those that few others would choose to serve, my faith crystallized. I finally understood why I had come. Better still, I finally understood why He had come.

For those who have spent Christmas as missionaries or volunteers, the memories of that first Christmas away from home often seem seared in our minds. The thoughts of home, the family and friends you desperately missed, the feasts and celebrations of your host culture, the warm embrace of a loving child, the hearts we touched, as well as the individuals who touched us with that extra special gesture or word...all this made home feel just a little closer.

For me, Christmas was the defining moment of my year of service. It finally put things in perspective and helped me realize and understand my Christianity and the reasons behind my actions of serving a group of suffering children half way around the world. My experience of Christmas fortified me with the strength to complete my year of service. It allowed for a new beginning. It's been three years since I passed that special Christmas in the L'Arche community of "Il Chicco." I think of the children often, especially around this time of year. I think not of my service to them, but of their service to me. With their broken bodies, broken speech and broken hearts, they taught me the meaning of unconditional love.

For me, every Christmas now has extra special meaning. For I've seen that Christmas can take us home, back to childhood traditions, back to new beginnings, back to loved ones that we've missed, back to people whom we served, back to strangers whom we loved. +

WORKSHEET QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. What are/were your thoughts and feelings about either going home or staying in your community for Christmas?

2. Colleen shares that the spirit of Christmas came alive for her through her students. In what ways has the spirit of Christmas come alive for you in your ministry?

3. What stresses did you experience around the holidays this year? How do they compare with other years?

4. James McCloskey described how his experience of Christmas with the young people strengthened him to want to complete his year of service. What are some of your sources of strength in this regard?

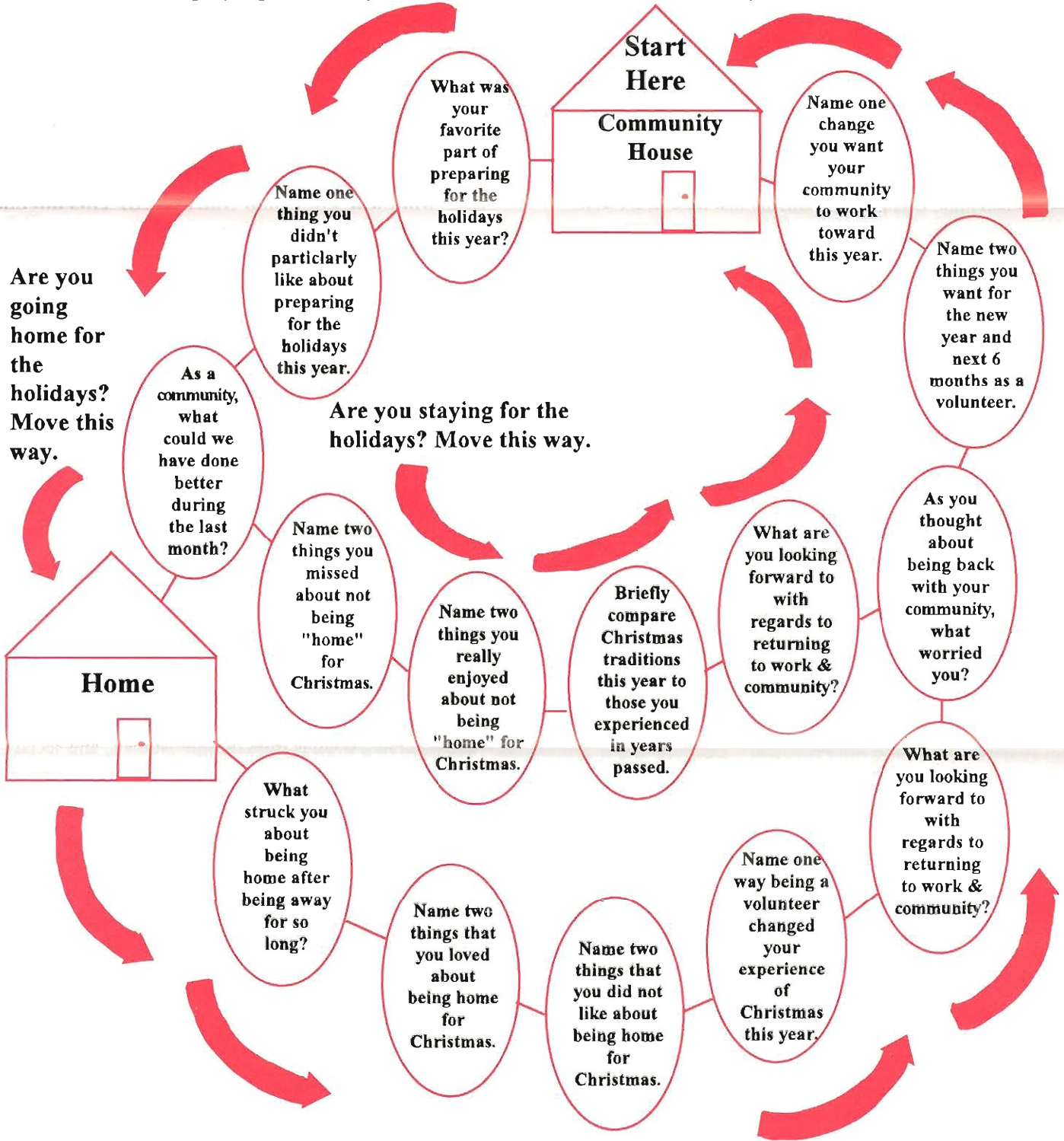
5. The young people of the L'Arche community also taught James the meaning of "unconditional love." What does this phrase mean for you? Describe any examples you may have of it from your own life.

6. What are some ways you see Christ in the Gospel stories teaching us about God's unconditional love for us? Share your examples with your fellow volunteers.

The Community Debriefing Game

HOW WERE THE HOLIDAYS FOR YOU?

Here's a great game for you and your community. You'll need coins or other small objects as player pieces, a die (singular for dice), and your community mates. Everyone start at your community house, and move through the holiday journey, answering the questions you hit along the way. Continue playing until everyone has made it back to the community house.



Staying "Up" in the New Year

For volunteers living in a winter climate, the decrease in sunlight hours can be part of a bigger challenge: keeping your spirits bright. Here are some suggestions. Perhaps your community can come up with even better ones for maintaining enthusiasm and openness to the "new" and growth in 1997.

1. Together, learn one new vocab word daily (any language).
2. Reverse any aspect of your pattern for getting dressed, shaving, etc.
3. Try something different for breakfast (tea instead of coffee, rice instead of cereal, eating rather than skipping).
4. Write down your dreams first thing when you awaken. Over time, look for patterns.
5. Learn one new stretching exercise each week and practice daily.
6. Write one letter a week to a family member or friend you haven't contacted recently.
7. Try juggling 3 balls at a time for 30 seconds. Errors are o.k.
8. Learn and explain to a fellow volunteer what a "fat calorie" is.
9. Identify any four-star constellations in the night sky.
10. Pick a target of achieving a reasonable physical goal, perhaps an exercise to help keep yourself in shape during winter. (Recent Tufts Univ. study found regular exercise improved blood flow to the brain) associated with positive outlook.)

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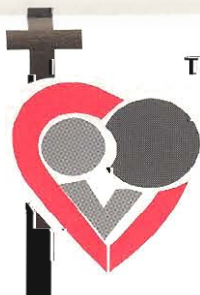
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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges the laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during and after* their term of service. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, Paterson, St. Louis and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.



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